
MARRIAGE – A RESTRICTED BOND IN THE ROOTS AND SHADOWS

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ABSTRACT

Roots and Shadows is the first full-length novel written by Deshpande though it was published after *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, her second novel. The novel highlights the agony and suffocation experienced by the protagonist Indu in a male-dominated and tradition-bound society. She finds herself suffocating under the stranglehold of our tradition-bound society and restricted married life. She finds herself alienated when she refuses to conform to the rigid code laid down by society. Marriage to the man of her choice brings only disillusionment when she finds her educated and ostensibly progressive-minded husband no different from the average Indian male.

INTRODUCTION

The novel deals with Indu's search for freedom to assert herself as an individual. This process brings her into confrontation with her family, with the male world, and society in general. The novel focuses on her interactions with the varied personalities in her large family and the manner in which this helps to resolve their future and her own personal crisis. Deshpande has very artistically juxtaposed two sets of women in Indian society. One set is the representative of tradition, represented by Akka, Narmada, Atya, Sumitrakaki, Kamalakaki, Sunanada Atya and Padmini and another set, representative of modernity, represented by the protagonist, Indu, who are educated and very much in contact with society, dealing with the critical problems of love, marriage, sex, settlement and individuality.

The novel begins with the marriage of Mini, Indu's cousin, which is performed in a traditional way in their ancestral home. It makes Indu think retrospectively about the events, which led to her returning home after a gap of eleven years. Indu, a middle-class girl, brought up in an orthodox brahmin family, headed by Akka (the mother surrogate in the novel) left home full of hatred for the family, for Akka specially. The eighteen-year old rebel, who leaves home to live life her own way, returns to her parental home on being summoned by the old matriarch, Akka, who is on her death bed. Indu is drawn once more into the vortex of the family as Akka makes her the sole inheritor of her property.

Though she is a victim of gender oppression, Akka perpetuates the same victimization as far as her influence extends. Indu learns her story through

Narmada Atya, only after her death. Narmada Atya's narration immediately evokes reader's pity and focuses attention on the plight of all those victims of child marriage who were sometimes forced to undergo inhuman treatment, bound as they were by the shackles of marriage. Indu often recollects Akka's story in Narmada Atya's words:

She was just twelve when she got married. And he was well past thirty. I remember him still. He was a tall, bulky man with large coarse features. And she... she was small and dainty, really pretty, with her round face, fair skin, straight nose and curly hair. Six months after her marriage, 'she grew up' and went to her husband's home. What she had to endure there, no one knows. She never told anyone. Our grandfather, her father, was a man who kept himself aloof. No one could approach him

easily. And her mother, our grandmother, died when she was a child. But I heard that twice she tried to run away... a girl of thirteen. Her mother-in-law, I heard, whipped her for that and locked her up for three days, starved her as well. And then, sent her back to her husband's room. The child, they said, cried and clung to her mother-in-law saying, "Lock me up again, lock me up." But there was no escape from a husband then. I remember her telling me before my own marriage was consummated, "Now your punishment begins, Narmada. You have to pay for all those saris and jewels¹.

Such child brides viewed sex as punishment, who nevertheless did not raise any banner of revolt but on the other hand continued to suffer and helped to

perpetuate such oppression. As Tara Ali Baig comments, “Arch traditionalists that women are, it is they who have successfully and brutally established man’s ascendancy over woman in society.”²

By portraying Akka’s marriage, Deshpande makes a strong statement on the so-called arranged marriages which are so unfair to women. A husband who finds his wife incompatible has at least the option of finding for himself another woman to satisfy his needs; but a wife in a similar situation has no option but to lead a loveless life. As NeenaArora remarks: “Man considers it as normal behavior to satisfy his desires at both the emotional and the physical levels outside marriage, while it is ruthlessly condemned as adultery in case a woman indulges in it even though accidentally, the slightest hint of any deviation on her part which may not even involve sex, man turns violent and hostile towards his wife and starts prosecuting her. This condemnation is dictated by man’s interest in preserving his property rather than by any moral consideration.”³

ShashiDeshpande in her novel *Roots and Shadows*, brilliantly presents the problem of marriage through Indu, the protagonist and her cousin Mini where one enjoys the freedom of marriage and the other accepts the traditional marriage. Deshpande highlights the problem faced by middle-class people in finding suitable grooms for their daughters. This

is aptly illustrated in the case of Padmini. Since a girl’s mind ever since her childhood is tuned that she is parayaDhan (another’s property), she tries to attach a lot of importance to it. Mini, brought up in a traditional way, doesn’t like to remain a burden on her parents and she prefers to go to her house, thus relieving the family of her burden. Mini’s stoic acceptance of her partner in marriage reminds the reader of Charlotte, in Jane Austen’s celebrated *Pride and Prejudice*. Charlotte unhesitatingly agrees to marry the ridiculous Collins for the fear of remaining unmarried if she let the opportunity slip by. It is indeed a tragedy that almost two hundred years later, even in the modern age, Indian girls echo the same sentiment where “it was marriage that mattered, not the man.”⁴ The line of sacrifices in a woman’s life begins with marriage.

Indu who has married against the wishes of the family is surprised to hear about Mini’s acceptance to the proposal in spite of the fact that the boy had “heavy, coarse features and crude mannerisms”.⁵ Indu questions Mini if she does not consider it a point to think of marriage. Mini replies “why should I think of it? I am past twenty four. I have to get married what else is there to think about?”(124)

Marriage makes a girl so “dependent” (106)-the fear that she may remain a spinster who in Indian society is constantly humiliated. Deshpande, through the character of Mini, gives the true facts of marriage experienced by a middle-class family. These are the problems that every girl in the contemporary society experiences and therefore submits herself ultimately to marriage.

Padmini agrees to marry the dreadful man and yet she is happy because she is “fulfilling her destiny.”⁶ She is sick of having her father hunt around for eligible bachelors, of arranged meetings where she is found lacking in something or the other and explains to Indu the struggle involved in finding suitable marriage alliances:

You don't know what it has been like. Watching Kaka and Hemant and even Madhav-Kaka running around after eligible men. And then, sending the horoscope and having it come back with the message, "It doesn't match." And if the horoscopes matched there was the

meeting to be arranged. And mother and Atya slogging in the Kitchen the whole day. And all those people coming and staring and asking all kinds of questions ... And Kaka trying to laugh and talk to those people, while his eyes looked so anxious. And I, feeling as if I had committed a great crime by being born a girl. To make your parents look like that ... And finally, if everything was fine, there was the dowry.
(126)

ShashiDeshpande brings out the boiling problem of marriage as an evil social practice because right from the beginning to the end it is a history of woman's suppression, a long drawn out drama of negotiation in which she feels uncertain, is dragged all along the thrashing floor of humiliation till she

accepts the man helplessly. Whether he is a rake or an idiot or an uncultured boor.

Indu tries to give a picture of the after effects of marriage to Mini and explains to her what it really means: "Marriage means living with a man. You have to listen to him, endure his habits, his smell, his touch, his likes, his dislikes. You have to sleep with him, bear him children. Can you do all that with this man?"(124)

ShashiDeshpande in her writings has tried to see and define what an Indian marriage is. Getting the daughters married is a sense of achievement for the parents. There are no emotions involved in bringing the two different entities together.

In the novel, Indu defines a traditional marriage contemptuously as "Two people brought together after cold-blooded bargaining to meet, mate and reproduce so that the generations might continue."⁷ She broods over the fate of women in a large family and deeply resents the fact that in traditional joint Hindu families, women are nothing more than puppets, without any identity, voice or name.

CONCLUSION

Marriage, which is considered a tie of two souls, is thus degraded to an extent that it becomes nothing but a ritual, involving no responsibility, sharing and understanding of the two minds. Thus, the society

influences woman, imposes the burden of marriage and leaves her with no choice.

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